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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a theoretical approach to understanding how youth community service participation can stimulate identity development and encourage civic investment. The study elucidates the developmental processes through which individuals become invested in civic activities and the activities in which youth are involved. The paper explains developmental continuity in civic participation from adolescence to adulthood and then illustrates this approach using data from a case study of participants in a school-based service program. Findings are presented from a 1993-1994 juniors' essays on service and from the alumni surveys and essays. Presenting participants' reflections as they go through the program and 3-, 5-, and 10-years later, the study shows how service experience can stimulate reflections on self in relation to society and can foster a sense of agency and responsibility. (Contains 19 references.) (EH)

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Engendering Civic Identity through Community Service

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Engendering Civic Identity through Community Service

This paper outlines a theoretical approach to understanding how community service participation in youth can stimulate identity development and encourage civic investment. Recently, sociologists (Coleman, 1987) and political scientists (Putnam, 1995) have noted a decline in civic investment in US society, as manifest in decreasing membership in networks, adherence to norms and values, and trust in society's institutions and other people. Concern about this decline meshes with the fear that contemporary youth tend to be shut out of the workings of adult society and lack a sense of responsibility for its maintenance and renewal (e.g., Boyte, 1991; Flacks, 1988).

In discussing the evolution of this current situation, commentators tend to focus on historical changes in social structure related to work, family, and culture. Our approach differs. As a starting place, we are interested in elucidating the developmental processes through which individuals become invested in civic activities. This approach requires taking a close look at the activities in which youth are involved. Previous research indicates that youth who are involved in high school government or belonged to adult-endorsed youth organizations, such as 4-H, tend to be more involved in political and civic affairs in adulthood than comparison adults who were not participants during youth (e.g., Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

In this paper, we present a theoretical approach to explaining developmental continuity in civic participation from adolescence to adulthood. We then illustrate this approach using data from a case study of participants in a school-based service program. Presenting participants' reflections as they go through the program and 3-, 5-, and 10-years later, we show how service experience can stimulate reflections on self in relation to society and can foster a sense of agency and social responsibility. In considering the impact of service experiences on youth, it should be noted that 59% of teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 volunteered in 1996 and that 50% of volunteers indicated that their school organized their service involvement (Independent Sector, 1997).

Theoretical Perspective

Based on a review of previous research on student activism and community service in youth, we hypothesized that participation in community activities during adolescence can promote identity development, which includes conceptualizing of oneself as citizen and moral agent (Yates & Youniss, 1996b). This hypothesis was influenced by Erikson's (1968) emphasis on the socio-historical aspect of identity. He described identity formation as a process of finding one's place in history by affiliating with an ideological position that gives present behavior transcendent meaning and provides hope for the future.

Community service is an apt candidate for promoting identity insofar as it allows youth to test their agency by addressing real societal needs. It puts them in touch with problematic aspects of society and gives them responsibility to help address these problems. Moreover, service is often mediated by community organizations such as schools and churches. These organizations articulate explicit viewpoints on social, moral, and political issues. Serving within

these contexts, youth are able to assess particular ideological orientations and determine their value in making moral commitments toward society. Service is, thus, potentially valuable for providing developmental opportunities (Newmann & Rutter, 1983) that may lead directly to the actions required for productive adult membership in society.

Case Study

Over the past three years, we have been collecting data from a school-based community service program which requires parochial high school juniors to work four times at the same downtown soup kitchen as part of a year-long course on social justice. The school and soup kitchen are located in a major northeastern city. Our data come from three successive classes of juniors (average age at the beginning of the school year = 16; average class size = 150) as well as alumni who graduated in 1985 (N = 26), 1990 (N = 60), and 1992 (N = 61). Almost all the students and alumni are Black and come from middle class family backgrounds. Twenty percent receive financial aid to help pay an annual tuition of $3,500. We have collected several types of data on the service program including surveys, essays, focus groups, and participant observations.

Here, we present findings from the 1993-1994 juniors' essays on service and from the alumni surveys and essays. Our first purpose is to show how service encouraged reflections on self in relation to society's political processes and moral order. These findings, exemplified using the 1993-1994 essays, are described in brief because they have been presented more extensively elsewhere (Yates & Youniss, 1996a; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Next, the alumni data are used to address the central question of continuity in civic commitment. This data offers suggestive evidence that the alumni continued to frame their adolescent service experience as an identity-defining event pertinent to their present lives.

Reflections on Service: Study of 1993-1994 Juniors

After each of four assigned trips to the soup kitchen, students were asked to write a one-page essay on their day of service. While it was expected that some students would offer a chronological account of their day of service, for example a description of arriving, preparing food, serving, and cleaning up; it was also expected that other students would write reflectively, for example relating the service experience to their prior notions of homelessness. Working with pilot data from the previous year, a coding scheme was developed that focused on how students interpreted their service experience beyond the "here and now" of concrete actions. Students' evaluations were coded into three levels of increasingly encompassing and transcendent reflections. Table 1 exemplifies these levels:

Table 1

Excerpts Illustrating Levels of Reflection

Level 1 - See homeless person as an individual rather than as a stereotype.

"There was a man whose legs and hands were shaking....What seemed to be wrong was he must be going through some type of withdrawal...I finally got up the nerve to ask him what was wrong...he replied, 'nothing at all, but can I have me some soup'....What shocked me was that I was afraid because he looked the way he looked. I was afraid of his homelessness and dirtyness. But when I took the courage to ask him what was wrong, he wasn't dirty, he became more human...."

Level 2 - Confront consciousness of one's everyday life. Compare one's life circumstances to another's, specifically a homeless person's, lot.

"On this one trip I got to meet a variety of people I would have never seen if I was washing dishes or taking out the garbage. Even after all my encounters with the homeless I still felt these people were strange. And I continued to serve. It wasn't until one man who was passing through the line told me that the streets have messed up their heads. I thought about it and thought what would I be like if I was forced to live on the streets without knowing what the next day will bring. I go crazy when I don't have money for McDonald's. What would happen to me if I lived like they do?"

Level 3 - Reflect on justice and responsibility. Theorize about confronting injustice through altering personal actions or societal processes.

"All of my life when I have had problems people have told me to look on the bright side. But when I look at homelessness and poverty there is no bright side...If you really look at it we use the homeless and impoverished as our bright side. Whenever we have problems, whenever things don't go the way we want them to go we say look on the bright side at least we are not homeless, at least you have food on your table....Why do they have to always be our bright side? Who's going to be their bright side? Why are we content with having a class of people below us who can make us feel better when we think of how bad they have it? Why not help them to get to where you are? Why not have a bright side come from within, rather than from people who have it bad enough as is."

This scheme fits with the Eriksonian notion of identity because it indicates that students are explicitly grappling with social, moral, and political issues and their role in addressing these issues. Three people coded each essay and, as a measure of interrater reliability, we attained a kappa of .81 (see Yates & Youniss, 1996a, for further details on coding scheme).

Working with essays from the 1993-1994 juniors, we found that 50% made a codable reflective statement in their first essay and an additional 25% made reflective statements for the

first time in a subsequent essay. This scheme, therefore, appears useful for elucidating the manner in which students reflect on service experience. Here we address three questions in relation to the juniors' reflective statements: (1) Is there a logical pattern to the incidence of reflections over the year? (2) Is the incidence of reflections related to emotional and social engagement in service experience? and (3) Are reflections related to the likelihood of future service?

Developmental pattern of reflections. Because essays were written by each student at four points during the year we were able to trace changes in reflections over the course of the year. Three findings indicated a developmental pattern with regard to the incidence of reflections. First, reflective statements were logically related to students' background experiences. Students who made reflective statements in their first essay had prior community service experience ($r_s = .20$, $p < .075$) and came from families who performed service ($r_s = .15$, $p < .075$). Second, reflective statements were consistent. Students who made reflective statements at the beginning of the year were likely to make them in subsequent essays. Third, reflective statements were directional. Students tended to make higher level reflections over the course of the year (see Yates, 1996, for a more detailed presentation of these findings).

Role of affect. A key question concerns the process through which these reflections emerge. Based on the work of Hoffman (1981) and Eisenberg (1986) on moral emotions, we hypothesized that emotional and social engagement might encourage reflections. The findings supported this hypothesis. Sadness ($r_s = .19$, $p < .075$) was related to the shift from descriptive to reflective. Students who wrote about feeling sad in earlier descriptive essays were likely to write a reflective essay later in the year. Feeling good about helping ($r_s = .51$, $p < .01$) and offering detailed descriptions about the live of individuals met ($r_s = .42$, $p < .05$), were related to making more encompassing reflections (Yates, 1995).

Projected volunteering. The final question sought to connect reflection to future action. Within the time frame of the study of the 1993-1994 juniors, we were limited to asking in the end of the year survey about the likelihood of future service participation. Hierarchical logistic regression analysis indicated that long-term plans to volunteer (after education complete) were related to course grade, having a friend who does service, and whether or not the final essay included a reflective statement (see Table 2).

Table 2

Long-Term Projected Volunteering: Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Definitely Volunteering vs. Not Definitely Volunteering on Background Characteristics, Sex, Course Grade, and Reflective Statement in Final Essay

Variables	SE	Wald	df	sig	Log Odds
Refl. Statement in Final Essay	.6842	7.19	1	.007	6.26
Grade	.8289	6.64	1	.01	8.47
Friend	.6447	4.38	1	.03	3.86

Note. Model Chi-square: X^2 (3, N = 101) = 23.83, $p < .000$

Summary

This scheme for coding students' service essays helps to show empirically how participants may construct an increasingly encompassing and transcendent interpretation of a specific social problem. Students examined their preconceptions about homeless people, compared their own life situation to another's, and, finally, theorized about societal conditions that create homelessness and their own role in changing these conditions. The findings on engagement fit with the literature on the salience of moral emotions and offer insight into the process through which reflective understanding might emerge. Lastly, the data suggest a connection between reflecting on the broader meaning of a service experience in relation to one's own life and willingness to participate in service in the future. Thus, these reflections may offer a window into students' emerging civic identity. Using data from alumni, the question of the long-term meaning of junior year service experience is further addressed.

Continuity from High School to Adulthood: Alumni Study

During winter of 1993-1994, alumni from the classes of 1985, 1990, and 1992 were sent surveys in the mail and our response totaled 43%, 36%, and 50% of whom we had addresses in the three respective classes. These surveys included close-ended items on demographics, service, and political attitudes and behavior as well as an essay question. In addition, the teacher had saved the first wave of soup kitchen essays written by the classes of 1990 and 1992 when they were juniors. Here, we present three kinds of findings. First, we look at whether service in high school is related to service in adulthood. Next, we address whether voting and service in adulthood are related to junior year reflections. Third, we trace continuity in the themes of students' essays written several years apart (for further details on alumni study see Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Relationship between Service in High School and in Adulthood

Given that several studies have reported a relationship between membership in service organizations in youth and in adulthood (e.g., Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Verba, Schlozman, &

Brady, 1995), we looked at whether alumni who, as youth, were involved in service beyond the school requirement continue to be involved today. We found significant relationships between extracurricular service participation in adolescence and belonging to a service organization in adulthood ($r_s = .22$, $p < .05$), volunteering at a soup kitchen since high school ($r_s = .19$, $p < .05$), and service participation since high school graduation ($r_s = .37$, $p < .00$). We also found that social networks continue to be important and that students who perform service in adulthood tend to come from families who participate in service ($r_s = .33$, $p < .00$).

Service Reflections and Civic Actions

The next question concerned whether reflections in high school would be related to civic behavior in adulthood. The teacher presented us with a subsample of 42 essays written by students in the classes of 1990 ($n = 13$) and 1992 ($n = 29$) after their first trip to the soup kitchen. Using the scheme described above, we found that 50% of students made transcendent reflections, a finding matching the percentage of 1993-1994 juniors. Then, we looked at whether making reflective statement was associated with doing service after high school and voting. For this analysis, reflectivity was operationalized as a four category, ordinal variable. Correlations coefficients indicated a near significant relationship between reflectivity and voting in national elections ($r_s = .26$, $p < .10$), and voting in local elections ($r_s = .30$, $p < .075$).

Continuing Themes

Another way to glean information from the alumni data was to compare the essays that these individuals wrote as juniors with ones that they wrote in response to the alumni survey. As part of the survey, alumni were asked to respond to the following probe, written by the teacher: "Now that your time at high school is some years distant, please take a few moments to write a short essay reflecting upon the values and ideas which you learned in junior religion, and the person that you are today. Was a measurable, lasting impact made upon you in class and at the kitchen? In what ways? Or have the values and experience faded?"

In reading over the alumni essays, we noted several recurring themes. Two themes, in particular, were continuous across more than 25% the junior year and alumni essays. These are an empathic outlook toward people previously thought of as "other" and relating one's own agency to helping less fortunate individuals.

Empathy toward the "other". Example 1 comes from a Black female alumna who graduated in 1992 and is currently enrolled in college. She is politically moderate, votes, reads news magazines, and regularly discusses political issues with family members but not with friends. She has not done volunteer service since high school.

In October, 1990, she wrote: "One homeless woman came to me and said, 'You look just like my daughter, black and pretty.' I said, 'Thank you.' I asked her where her daughter was and she told me she didn't know. She just hoped her daughter was making something of herself [more] than she did. Right then and there, she began to cry. I told her don't worry and that her daughter will be alright."

In the spring of 1994, when asked to describe the impact of the social justice class, the same female wrote: "Mr. Siwek's class has had a lasting impact on me. His class taught me that there are people suffering much more than we as a society may think and it is time for a change. I feel that my view about certain things has not changed since my junior year, only my life [has changed]."

Example 2 comes from a Black female presently enrolled in college. She is a political moderate, votes, reads news magazines, and discusses political issues with her family and friends. She has continued to do volunteer service and currently volunteers at a shelter for the homeless in the city where she attends college. In October, 1990, she wrote: "My best moment was when this elderly man told me 'Thank you; thank you for this food. Thank you for serving this to me. God bless you.' I never had such a wonderful feeling ... [Another] man made me laugh. He came through the line and I said, 'Would you like a peanut butter sandwich?' He told me 'Quite frankly, no. There is no way you can make me eat that sandwich.' Then he smiled."

In the spring 1994, the same female wrote: "I am currently working as a volunteer to help the homeless find jobs and homes. My life long ambition is to be able to start a program where all homeless can be helped in some way. My expectation is that if this program can catch on and a bill -- like the health bill, is passed, we can eliminate this plague. No one should be without, if we are truly a 'land of milk and honey.'"

Using one's agency to assist others in need. Example 3 comes from a Black female college student majoring in Business. She is politically moderate and uninvolved in politics. She volunteers at a hospital once a week and has done this for 2 years. In October, 1990, she wrote: "[The soup kitchen workers] were telling us that the homeless [are] just like us but their luck just ran out, that's all. When I was stirring the soup and making salads and sandwiches, something got to me. I was thinking, it could be me or you one day, you never know what the future may hold for us. Your health may go bad, your company go bankrupt or something."

In 1994 she wrote: "I am glad I did go to the soup kitchen in my junior year. The reason is because it made me realize [how] life really is. One day you can be the richest person there is and then one day you can lose at all."

Later in her 1990 essay, she wrote: "[The best moment of the day] was when I served food to them and they said thank you so much and may God bless you. It made me think how grateful I am to have somebody to care for me and they don't have [anybody] to love and care for them each and every day."

In parallel, in her 1994 essay, she wrote: "I still think about the times I have gone to the soup kitchen and fed them. It made me feel good to see another happy face that I made feel good for that day. Maybe one of these days the country might see to it that everybody can have a place to stay."

Example 4 comes from a Black male Harvard undergraduate who was accepted to law school at Harvard and Yale. He is a member of several clubs, politically active, votes, and has

done volunteer service since high school. In October, 1988, he wrote: "The soup and the sandwiches became thin and were running out, and a man asked me for two sandwiches. I thought how could he be so selfish when he has 50 people in line behind him. Then I came to the conclusion that he was not selfish, the American people were selfish, and as a result, he was out on the street."

In 1994, three months before his college graduation, he wrote: "The class changed me from a smart kid with a future to a smart kid with a future who gives a damn. I have always been a nice and caring person but I didn't see things the way I do now until 11th grade religion."

Later in his 1988 essay, he wrote: "The kitchen was not horrible as my classmates had told me. The only horrible thing was a mother and two year old daughter in the line. I didn't think about it for real until the little girl came to the window, stretched out her hand and asked, 'Can I have one more sandwich, please?' I felt like giving her 100 sandwiches, not only 100 sandwiches but a house and her mother a job. When she walked away with the peanut butter sandwich, I could only ask myself, 'Why?'

At the end of his 1994 essay, he wrote: "I have the world in my hand. I am three months from a Harvard degree. I will be attending Harvard or Yale law school in the fall. I am almost guaranteed more money, success and material goods than any Black kid from northeast DC can ever imagine. However, I plan to dedicate myself to creating the same opportunities for other kids in the inner city."

Summary

The alumni findings suggest continuity between service involvement and moral-political interpretation of service in adolescence and civic understanding in adulthood. Supporting other work in the literature (e.g., Clary & Miller, 1986; Keith, Nelson, Schlabach, & Thompson, 1990), it was not surprising to find that alumni who belonged to a network of service in adolescence and came from families who do service continue to be involved in adulthood. The relationship between high school reflectivity and later voting and campaign work may reveal a part of the process through which the seeds of civic commitment are sown in youth. These findings demonstrate that it would be fruitful to explore further the influence of service reflections in youth on different forms of civic actions in adulthood and, if productive, also to investigate how reflectivity on service can be encouraged.

We presented the two themes of continuity because they show that several years later, the experience at the soup kitchen continues to serve a landmark event for alumni that helped to clarify personal values and a sense of agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness. The affective intensity and vividness of both sets of essays fit with findings from a growing area of research on self-defining memories. Singer and Salovey (1993), for example, argue that the study of memories can offer insight into personality formation and that specific memories may help to organize identity.

Cross' (1995) writings on the role of encounter experiences in identity formation help explain why service experience may be particularly salient to identity. Work at the kitchen was emotionally intense, evoking feeling of sadness, anger, and exhilaration. Students were brought face-to-face with the harsh realities of poverty, an experience made all the more dramatic by the soup kitchen's being located near several quite lucrative, downtown businesses. The students were confronted with contrast and contradiction which many felt the need to interpret in terms of their own lives and actions. Service experience offered students the opportunity to encounter and reflect on aspects of political and moral order in society and to take initial steps toward envisioning themselves as responsible agents for society's well being.

Conclusion

The data from this case study indicate that community activities in adolescence are pertinent to understanding civic commitment in adulthood. The findings illustrate a process in which one's relationship to society is not given, but must be constructed with knowledge of history and awareness of how society is currently structured. With these prerequisites in place, youth can make decisions about sustaining or changing the present order and determine the positions they will take toward society in the future. While we certainly believe that some individuals do not develop a sense of civic investment until adulthood and that the commitment of some adolescents may dwindle, our data suggests that the promotion of a reflective attitude in adolescence can set a pattern that continues and has impact throughout adulthood. Individuals' outlooks on society will necessarily change with experiences at work, in personal relationships, with government, etc. What differentiates individuals in terms of civic commitment, however, are beliefs in agency and a sense of responsibility for the way society is and ought to be.

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